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TEENAGE GIRLS, FEMALE FRIENDSHIP AND THE MAKING OF THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION IN ENGLAND, 1950-1980*

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Running Head: TEENAGERS AND THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION

Abstract: How can we explain rising levels of pre-marital sex in post-war Britain? Focussing on the experiences of young women growing up in Britain between 1950 and 1980, this article argues that changes in sexual practice were brought about by shifts in the social value of sexual knowledge and experience. While the figure of the 'Nice Girl' was still central to understandings of respectable femininity, across this period social status and reputation became linked to demonstrations of attractiveness and sexual knowing. For girls of the post-war generation, discussions of sex were central to how girls related to those around them and the decisions teenagers made about their own sexual practice were informed by their perceptions of what their friends and peers would think of them. The article argues that by considering the history of sexuality at a 'local' scale between the macro-level of culture and the micro-level of individual sexual selfhood we not only gain an important new perspective on the everyday sexual experience but we uncover new processes of socio-sexual change.

I

Studying the lives of adolescent girls in the late 1970s, the educational psychologist E. M. Chandler lamented the sexual culture now confronting teenagers. Sexual mores had undergone a radical transformation since her own youth: gone were the days when 'everyone knew that sex outside marriage was wicked', and young people now had 'the freedom to move lightly into intense sexual experience'. According to Chandler, what had changed was not simply that girls were more aware of sex and that they had new opportunities to engage in sexual activity but that there were new incentives and justifications for having sex. The logic of 'Everyone else was doing it so I thought I'd better,' now

underpinned the sexual behaviour of young women and this concern with ‘everyone else’ was ‘their only guideline as to how to behave.’¹ In Chandler’s view, then, a revolution in young people’s behaviour had been accompanied by a profound reconfiguration of the significance of heterosexual relations to girls’ friendships and wider social networks. Social expectation now operated as an important factor motivating, rather than inhibiting, sexual activity.

The broad trajectory of sexual change described in this account is well known to historians of post-war Britain. While historians continue to debate if a distinctive ‘Sexual Revolution’ occurred in the 1960s, it is widely acknowledged that sexual culture shifted significantly across the second half of the century.² Yet, Chandler’s emphasis on the social significance of sexuality highlights a dimension of young people’s lived experiences that we know much less about. Although we have numerous accounts of the stigma that accompanied extra-marital pregnancy in the mid-century and a general understanding that perceived promiscuity was damaging to women’s ‘respectability’, we have little sense of the place of women’s heterosexuality within their broader social lives.³ In particular, the question of how women’s friendships and relationships with women shaped their relationships with men remains unanswered.

This article remedies this through an examination of the sexual lives of teenage girls in England between 1950 and 1980. Exploring the experiences of the so-called ‘baby-boomer’ or ‘breakthrough’ generation born in the fifteen years after World War Two, it examines the place of heterosexuality and sexual practice within teenage girls’ social networks and close friendships.⁴ I argue that the form and meaning of teenage girls’ heterosexuality was shaped by their homosociality; girls’ relationships with other girls had a profound impact on their relationships with boys. In this way, then, the article not only offers a new account of adolescent experience in post-war Britain but demonstrates the importance of telling social histories of sexuality that foreground how sexual lives were shaped by the local communities within which individuals lived.

Drawing upon personal testimonies, mid-century social research, and adolescent-oriented popular culture from the time, this article offers a new account of the lived experience of non-marital heterosexuality at a time of profound social change. It builds upon a rich tradition of feminist

scholarship that uses personal testimonies not only to 'locate' women in history but to emphasize how social change influenced, and was itself enacted through, the choices of individuals.⁵ This research draws upon more than 150 responses to Mass Observation Directives on 'Close Relationships' (1990), 'Courtship and Dating' (2001) and 'Sex' (2005) as well as thirty-two original oral history interviews conducted by the author in 2014/15. Reflecting the participants of these projects, the analysis centres on the lives of girls who grew up in white middle and upper-working class families. Although the type of memory work performed in Mass Observation testimonies and oral history interviews should not be conflated, both sources are being used in their 'reflective' modes here as a means of exploring experiences and feelings of the past.⁶ As other scholars have noted, this approach is not without its challenges, and questions regarding the veracity of memory are valid.⁷ However, the recall of specific details and individual events is of less concern here than the broader cultures within which women experienced their adolescence and, in this way, oral histories and reflective testimonies offer insights that cannot be acquired elsewhere. Crucially, while we primarily understand memory texts as reflections and articulations on individual selfhood, this material can also tell us much about how this selfhood was shaped by individuals' interactions with the people around them.

Considering what I will call the 'social life' of sexuality in this way offers new insights into three key narratives that underpin histories of heterosexuality in the twentieth century. Firstly, this focus on homosociality can shed new light on the place of privacy in intimate relationships. In their studies of mid-century marriages, Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher and Claire Langhamer have demonstrated the increasing significance of 'privacy' as a source of heterosexual intimacy; for many couples marrying in the mid-twentieth century, 'sex was private, and little discussed' and this 'contributed to their satisfaction with their partner'.⁸ While these accounts are compelling on their own terms, shifting attention to youth sexuality reveals that the relationship between heterosexuality and privacy functioned differently outside of marriage. As this article demonstrates, teenage girls growing up between 1950 and 1980 rejected absolute privacy – they 'went out' with partners in public, engaged in public displays of affection and willingly disclosed their heterosexual practice to their friends and peers. Across the twentieth century courtship and marriage acted as an important source of social status

for girls but this research suggests that the relationship between heterosexuality and reputation was in flux at this time. From the mid-century pre-marital sexual practice itself became valued as a form of social currency and girls' performance of heterosexuality increasingly involved displays of attractiveness and knowingness embedded in sexual activity. At the same time, sex was still seen by many as something special and secret and so discussing sex and relationships became an important means by which girls developed bond of friendship and intimacy with one another. Among this social demographic at this moment in time, heterosexuality was valued both as something that was private and intimate and as something to be displayed publicly in pursuit of social status.

Secondly, focussing on homosociality enhances the existing emotional history of sexuality. In particular, this account illustrates how the emotional landscape of heterosexuality exceeded the boundaries of romantic love. Feelings of romantic love were important to young women and this research does not necessarily contradict Langhamer's thesis that the mid-twentieth century witnessed an 'emotional revolution' as love came to be understood as the foundation of marriage and the key to individual happiness.⁹ It does suggest, however, that there were emotional registers of heterosexuality beyond romance and that recognising these can help us better understand how pre-marital sex and perceived 'promiscuity' flourished during the so-called 'golden age of marriage' from the 1950s.¹⁰ Emotions such as pride, envy, anxiety and excitement were central to teenage girls' heterosexual lives and these could be invoked through girls' female friendships as much as by their male partners. Girls may have been having relationships with boys but the meaning of these relationships was rooted within the dynamics of their female networks.

Finally, the article makes an important intervention into ongoing debates regarding the so-called 'Sexual Revolution' of the long-1960s. Recent research has yielded a rich account of sexual change in the mid-twentieth century. Narratives of long-term shifts in emotional¹¹ and religious cultures¹² sit alongside accounts of legislative interventions,¹³ technological advancement,¹⁴ and changes in press discourse¹⁵ to present a nuanced picture of sexual culture in flux in the middle decades of the century. Yet, in spite of this abundant research, explanations as to how and why this change came about remain less compelling. In particular, questions remain over how transformations at a national

level (such as legislation and health policy regulating contraception) or at a cultural level (religious doctrine and changing emotional landscapes) came to influence the mindsets and actions of individuals. This article bridges that divide by offering a new framework for explaining how shifts in sexual discourse were translated into sexual practice in the decades following the Second World War. I argue that sexuality needs to be understood as a social phenomenon that was shaped by and performed through individuals' relationships with their local communities and immediate social networks. New sexual values were internalized by individuals as a result of how they were articulated and enacted by their peers; shifts in legislation and the 'sexualisation' of popular culture mattered, in part, because they changed the conversations that individuals were having with their friends and families and they altered how girls interacted with those around them. Examining the experiences of teenage girls, we can observe how their sexual behaviour changed in accordance with emerging social codes that positioned sexual knowledge and experience as components of social status and reputation. As such, we can attribute rising levels of pre-marital sex to the decreasing social value of chastity and the rise of sexual experience as social currency.

After providing some context on the social landscapes of young people in the decades after the Second World War, the article makes these arguments in three stages. First, it considers how girls policed each other's sexual conduct in accordance with the moral codes that they inherited from their mothers and teachers. Focussing on the figure of the 'Nice Girl', this section reveals how long-standing codes of chaste femininity found new purchase in the mid-twentieth century. The personal testimonies examined here demonstrate that girls' sexual conduct had tangible consequences for their social lives as it directly affected how they were treated by their peers.

The second section builds upon this theme but challenges the assumption that a girls' sexual behaviour only had negative value for her reputation. For girls growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, it was not only important to have a boyfriend but sexual activity itself could function as a form of social currency. Considering the spatial politics of young people's sexual activity and the modes of sex talk that existed at this time, this research outlines how adolescent sexuality was becoming more visible in this period and argues that this rising visibility was deliberate as young people sought to 'display' their

heterosexuality in order to benefit from the social currency associated with sexual desirability and experience.

The final section considers the social life of adolescent sexuality from a different perspective, looking beyond these broad peer cultures to explore the place of sexual discourse within girls' close friendships. For girls of the post-war generation, discussing their heterosexuality was a crucial way in which they created and expressed intimacy with their closest friends. This section highlights how conversations about sex and relationships functioned as a way for girls to work through their feelings and understandings of their own heterosexuality.

Taken together, these three discussions demonstrate that the form and meaning of teenage girls' heterosexuality was shaped by girls' homosociality; girls' relationships with other girls had a profound impact on their relationships with boys. However, this adolescent sexual culture was unstable and contradictory. While the 'Nice Girl' trope persisted into the later decades of the twentieth-century, between 1950 and 1980 new incentives emerged that encouraged young people to engage in sexual activity. Similarly, although forms of social hierarchy based upon sexual reputation demanded that heterosexuality be 'public', the very fact that sex talk between friends was a marker of intimacy suggests that discussions of personal experiences of sex were still understood to be private. In this way, these discussions highlight the importance of understanding sexuality as a social phenomenon that is shaped by, and given meaning through, individuals' personal relationships with the people around them. By considering the history of sexuality at a 'local' scale between the macro-level of culture and the micro-level of individual sexual selfhood we not only gain an important new perspective on everyday sexual experience but also uncover new processes of socio-sexual change.

II

Before interrogating the relationship between girls' social networks and their heterosexuality, we should chart the particular social landscapes that young women inhabited between 1950 and 1980. Historical literature on youth culture in the post-war period has tended to focus on subcultures and the subcultural

framework has been extremely valuable in demonstrating how working-class youth resisted cultural norms in the second-half of the twentieth century.¹⁶ Less attention has been paid, however, to 'mainstream' culture and the broader networks of social relations that shaped individuals' adolescence. Ultimately, teenagers did not only socialise with others who shared their politics, style and/or outlook but also had relationships with peers that they were 'forced' to spend time with at school and work. These peer-networks did not necessarily result in emotionally intimate friendships, but they were an important component of young people's social life and experience.

Between the 1950s and the 1980s, psychological and sociological research repeatedly found that peer relationships were particularly important to adolescents. The idea that adolescence was a time when individuals distanced themselves from their family groupings and became increasingly preoccupied with their peer group was the starting point of much research into youth and adolescence. Researchers identified rising awareness of group dynamics and peer values as a key component of growing up: as the sociologist James Hemming observed in 1960, adolescents were 'anxious to stand well in the eyes of their contemporaries' and therefore 'whatever involve[d] their contemporaries assume[d] great significance for them'.¹⁷ The desire to 'fit in' with their peers could be a source of anxiety for young people; at the same time that being part of a clique could bolster a teenager's confidence, peer groups could also 'present continuous pressures for conformity and compliance'.¹⁸

Much of the impetus for this research sprung from anxieties surrounding the changing status of young people within British society and the feeling that youth culture was losing touch with the values and experiences of 'adult' society.¹⁹ It became apparent, for example, that young people's peer dynamics had been altered by post-war affluence which had created new material markers of social status.²⁰ Mark Abrams identified in the late 1950s that 'the quite large amount of money at the disposal of Britain's average teenager [was] spent on dressing-up in order to impress other teenagers'.²¹ Changes in individuals' material conditions thus created new ways for young people to define themselves and each other, fostering new communities and cultures of inclusion/exclusion. Equally important were changes to the education system in 1944 and beyond. Beyond simply extending academic opportunity, the expansion of compulsory education also fostered (however inadvertently) new social networks and

forms of community. The raising of the school leaving age (from 14 to 15 in 1944 and then to 16 in 1972) and the shift to co-educational comprehensive secondary education from the 1960s both worked to accentuate the importance of schools as hubs of youthful sociability. By broadening our definition of 'youth' to consider those in their lower teenage years, it is possible to explore the significance of schools in young people's lives.²² Rather than functioning simply as sites of learning, schools were social spaces for young people. School classrooms, corridors and playgrounds were spaces in which girls met, spent time with and bonded with their peers.

Within these school communities a certain degree of social structure was imposed upon young people as they were divided into class cohorts according to age and academic ability. However, young people also created social systems and dynamics of their own; although they may have shared lessons with a number of classmates, individuals tended to spend time with specific sub-groups or cliques within their cohort.²³ A 1979 study of a sixth form common room, for example, found that the space was divided into 'territories' with different 'sorts' of students congregating in different areas.²⁴ Boundaries between groups were porous and subject to change as girls fought and/or their situations changed but being part of a group was very important to young women growing up at this time.

Teenage girls growing up between 1950 and 1980 thus had to navigate a complex social landscape in which the values and opinions of their friends and peers took on increasing significance. How girls behaved had consequences not just for how they were perceived by their families and how they thought about themselves but could impact upon their social status and standing among their peers. As such, the codes of morality and 'proper' social conduct that were being articulated by their parents, priests, teachers and 'adult' society more broadly, had to be reconciled with the 'politics of the playground'. Although the desire to 'fit in' may have seemed trivial to adult commentators who perceived this to be a sorry excuse for poor behaviour, it was an extremely potent motivator for young people themselves, many of whom were deeply anxious about being ostracized by their classmates and peers. As the following sections demonstrate, these dynamics were particularly fraught when it came to questions of sex; there were clear links between girls' behaviour and cultures of expectation among their peer groups but at different times these could either encourage or inhibit sexual activity.

III

Studies of sexual mores in the early twentieth century have emphasized the potency of discourses that discouraged sex before marriage.²⁵ Undoubtedly, codes of sexual morality that expected girls to remain virgins until marriage and which implored girls to restrain themselves in their interactions with boys continued to exert influence upon teenage girls across the twentieth century. Magazines such as *Jackie* as well as the 'facts of life' literature often given to daughters by their mothers consistently cautioned girls against 'losing control' and 'going too far'.²⁶ Girls were warned that 'Promiscuity and indulgence before marriage will not build up a character that will prove loyal and dependable after marriage... Sowing wild oats can spoil the ground for the true crop'.²⁷ These values were pervasive and mid-century social surveys indicated that the majority of the population, including young women themselves, believed that girls should remain virgins until marriage.²⁸ It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that women remembered this period as one of continued sexual repression, suggesting that 'sex was not something that anyone spoke about'²⁹ and that it had been 'drummed into' them that 'death was better' than having an illegitimate child.³⁰

These codes of sexual restraint were not simply imposed upon girls by adults, however. The values and sexual mores of previous generations were undoubtedly impressed upon teenage girls via popular culture as well as through lessons given by parents and teachers. It might be easy to assume that this was the dominant discourse of this time as the written record of sexual culture in the long-1960s prioritizes the voices of the forty, fifty and sixty year olds who sought to comment on the 'sexual revolution' they perceived to be occurring and who felt compelled to 'educate' young people about the 'new' sexual landscape into which they were maturing.³¹ But girls did not passively imbibe all that they were told. Girls often adopted the codes of behaviour that they had inherited from their parents and adapted these to suit the youth sociability of the post-war period. Within girls' peer networks, these moral frameworks took on a life of their own as girls mobilized them against one another.

This was most evident within women's discussions of the 'Nice Girl' trope that was prevalent during their adolescence. The notion of the 'Nice Girl' was theorized by the feminist scholar Greer Litton Fox in the late 1970s; as she explained the 'Nice Girl' was a value construct that idealized femininity as 'chaste, gentle, gracious, ingenuous, good, clean, kind, virtuous, noncontroversial, and above suspicion and reproach'.³² As personal testimonies of the post-war generation demonstrate, however, this formulation pre-dated Fox's work; for teenage girls in post-war Britain, the 'Nice Girl' was already a potent figure. Although exact definitions varied, Mass Observer Carolyn's description of 'nice girls' as those who 'didn't run around with lots of different boys...and most important of all you didn't get pregnant' was fairly typical.³³ As women from across this generational cohort described, the expression 'nice girls didn't' was used in their youth to promote codes of chastity and sexual restraint.³⁴ The potency of this model stemmed from the fact that, unlike abstract moral lessons about chastity guaranteeing virtue, the idea of the 'Nice Girl' seemed rooted in the reality of post-war society. The 'Nice Girl' model appreciated that extra-marital sex was visible to young people and acknowledged that couples could have sex outside of matrimony. Rather than ignoring this or denying that sex could be pleasurable, the 'Nice Girl' framework encouraged girls to refrain from sex on the basis that chastity was the only way to secure their future happiness through marriage. Boys, girls were told, did not want to marry girls who had reputations for being 'scrubbers' who slept around.³⁵

Young women of the mid-century inherited the notion of the 'Nice Girl' from the older generation as mothers explicitly passed this framework down to their daughters. Having been raised near Manchester in the mid-1950s, Jane recalled: 'The most important word in mother's talk was NO. "Nice" girls did not do it before marriage. This was continually reiterated, to me and also my friends[sic] mothers said the same words to their daughters.'³⁶ Almost ten years later Deborah's mother also 'made it clear that sex before marriage was not for nice girls like me'.³⁷ Mothers' demands that their daughters be 'Nice Girls' were intended to secure individual girls' happiness; mothers were deeply invested in their own daughters' futures.³⁸ However, the concept of the 'Nice Girl' was inherently comparative and set girls up in opposition to one another. In stating that, 'Girls who "slept around" were universally condemned', Mass Observer Daisy was not referring to a straight generational divide in sexual morality

but was speaking to the condemnation that girls directed towards their own peers when they were deemed to have transgressed the boundaries of acceptable sexual conduct.³⁹

Armed with the vocabularies of their mothers, girls policed one another's sexual behaviour and ensured the survival of this moral framework as they judged one another against these codes. Girls could be scathing of open promiscuity which was understood as sleeping with 'too many' men and although girls like Linda could be friends with the so-called 'scrubbers', 'there was judgement, definitely judgement'.⁴⁰ Theresa attended an all-girls grammar school in the early 1970s and was particularly candid about having been judgemental of other girls' sexuality:

I looked down on the ones that did and made it known to everybody. Y'know, the ones that come home, I mean to school after the weekend, telling everybody how much they'd been at it and that their backs were aching because they'd done so, y'know, I mean it was, it was annoying. Um, and I was sort of scornful.⁴¹

It was rare for girls to directly confront those whose behaviour they deemed to be inappropriate but, as Theresa's testimony reflects, sexual reputations profoundly shaped how girls related to one another and became an organising principle of girls' social groupings.

Many women spoke of how clear distinctions emerged between those who were engaging in sexual activity and those who were not as they moved into their mid-teenage years. As Evelyn recalled: 'My school friends and I used to compare notes, guessing which other girls "did" with their boyfriends, and which didn't; there's no doubt that we looked down on girls whom we thought "did".'⁴² As explored further below, discussing the sexual reputations of other girls was a staple activity of many girls' friendship groups and one which could help to bond groups with similar attitudes together. As Theresa and Evelyn's testimonies highlight, however, this moral framework was also divisive and exclusionary. As Linda went on to suggest, girls' emerging heterosexuality forced them to reevaluate their relationships with their female peers: 'Although they might have been your best friends when you were 14, 15, suddenly they weren't anymore because you had different values.'⁴³ Between 1950 and 1980,

codes of sexual morality that emphasized the importance of restraint were not simply imposed upon young women by adult society, teenagers bought into this framework, mobilized it amongst themselves and used it to inform their relationships with one another.

IV

The persistence of the ‘Nice Girl’ trope illustrates how value continued to be associated with virginity and chasteness throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Yet, characterising this as having been the dominant discourse of heterosexuality at this time creates a problem for historians attempting to account for sexual change in the decades following the Second World War. Evidence collected by mid-century sociologists as well as the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles indicates that the average age at which individuals had penetrative intercourse for the first time fell across the second half of the century: whereas the median age at first intercourse for women born in the early 1930s (and who were teenagers in the late-1940s) was 21, the average for those born in the early 1960s was 18.⁴⁴ It is difficult to explain this shift if we frame sexual culture solely in terms of the enduring hegemony of chastity and ‘Nice Girls’; if potent social stigma continued to plague pre-marital sex, why would increasing numbers of girls be engaging in penetrative intercourse? Changes in sexual practice begin to make more sense, however, if we move beyond the assumption that visible sexuality only had a negative value within girls’ social networks. Among post-war teenagers, being known to be sexually active did not simply *cost* girls their reputations, rather girls’ sexuality could be revered and valued. In many cases, heterosexuality was a source of social status and currency.

Growing up in the 1970s, ‘having a boyfriend, preferably one in the year above was important’ to Mass Observer Betty and her friends.⁴⁵ There were several reasons why having a male partner was important. As Penny Tinkler and others have suggested, the leisure landscape of post-war youth culture was often orientated around heterosexual coupling and activities such as going to dances or out to the pictures all seemingly required a partner.⁴⁶ Having a boyfriend thus enabled girls to participate in leisure activities that were otherwise unavailable to them. Claire Langhamer has also demonstrated how

romantic love was increasingly positioned as the primary source of personal fulfilment for women.⁴⁷ Female-oriented popular culture idealized romantic love, positioning heterosexual intimacy as the desired goal of young femininity and girls growing up at this time were desperate to avoid being 'left on the shelf'.⁴⁸ Girls thus sought out boyfriends as they believed this type of relationship to be central to their happiness both in the short term by guaranteeing entertainment and in the long-term by marking the first steps on their way to womanly fulfilment.

These were both powerful motivations for engaging in heterosexual relationships but girls' interest in having boyfriends went beyond a desire to have escorts. Testimonies suggest that having boyfriends was a way for girls to demonstrate their attractiveness and desirability to their female peers. Displaying their heterosexuality was not simply a means of gaining validation from boys but was about acquiring social status amongst girls. The centrality of this female-centric culture of heterosexuality was demonstrated within the reflective testimonies by the extent to which women's accounts of their early relationships focussed on themes of expectation, popularity and status rather than on the emotional or desirous elements of boy-girl relationships. As Andrea described: 'I felt the lack of a boyfriend because I was worried about being different from other girls my age, many of whom had boyfriends'.⁴⁹ Testimonies foregrounded teenage girls' anguish about not having boyfriends and emphasized their desire to find partners in order to 'keep up' with their female friends and peers. Heather recalled it being 'humiliating' that at age fifteen no-one wanted to go out with her while Janice remembered crying in her early teens because 'everyone else' had boyfriends when she did not.⁵⁰

As girls moved into their mid-teenage years heterosexuality became a preoccupation of many peer groups and divides emerged between those interested in pursuing boys and the others. Some girls simply reconciled themselves to this situation, acknowledging their friends' new interests in boys but retaining their own focus on schoolwork, hobbies or female friendships.⁵¹ For others, the solution was to begin relationships with male classmates or local boys despite having no real interest in the boys themselves. Stephanie, who was a teenager in the mid-1970s, cynically remembered her first boyfriend at school: 'we just spent time together up near a door in the swimming pool, me and him, his friends and a group of girls...I had no feelings, it was just "Oh, somebody's asked me out! I'll go out with him

‘cos that means I’ve got a boyfriend’”.⁵² Similarly, Heather recalled how she ‘forced’ herself to go out with anyone who asked ‘just so I could say I had got a boyfriend’.⁵³ Elsewhere, the practice of inventing fake boyfriends reflected the extent to which the *illusion* of heterosexual practice was more important to girls than its reality. Once the more ‘physically developed’ girls at her all-girls school started ‘going out’ with boys, Jill and her friends ‘made up fictitious boyfriends who we met at places never frequented by other girls we knew’.⁵⁴ For girls like Jill, being perceived as having a boyfriend was key to maintaining a degree of status and respect amongst their peers.

Among those who did have boyfriends, the meaning of these relationships was partially shaped by a belief that girls with boyfriends were somehow superior to those who did not have partners. Sarah described how she gladly came to date one of her friends’ ex-boyfriends: ‘I wasn’t proud or choosy then, just desperate. Oh the joy of being able to boast at school that I was going out with a boy! I definitely felt I was now on a higher plane of existence.’⁵⁵ Kay and Diana described the thrill they got when their boyfriends would pick them up from school.⁵⁶ They enjoyed seeing their partners but the act of being met at the school gates also served to display their relationships and provide evidence of it to their female friends. These relationships and these rituals of heterosexuality thus had emotional meaning beyond the ‘romantic’ and incorporated feelings of pride and self-satisfaction. Within these narratives, these boyfriends were presented as minor characters and the lasting significance of these relationships lay in what they meant for girls as individuals and as actors within a broader female social network. For girls of this generation, part of the imperative of heterosexuality lay in its offer of heightened social status among female peer-networks.

To an extent, this socio-sexual culture of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s should be understood as an intensification of much older discourses of femininity that expected girls to pursue and eventually ‘achieve’ marriage and motherhood.⁵⁷ However, there was an important shift in the post-war period as the ‘sexual’ components of heterosexuality were increasingly understood as a form of social currency in themselves. For girls growing up between 1950 and 1980, social standing was not solely linked to having a boyfriend or male interest and therefore ‘proving’ one’s attractiveness and ability to secure a

husband, but was increasingly bestowed upon those who demonstrated a degree of sexual knowledge and experience. Heterosexuality was, at this time, directly linked to embodied sexual practice.

This shift was made visible by the rising prevalence of public displays of affection. Some adult observers in the mid-century found young couples' kissing and cuddling in public distasteful; a 1949 Mass Observation report on 'Love-Making in Public' concluded that 'The overall picture...is one of disapproval in the main, tempered by some understanding of the difficulties which cause people, especially young people, to do their love-making in public.'⁵⁸ Teenagers themselves, however, understood these physical intimacies quite differently; they did not necessarily see 'love-making' in public as taboo. As it became more common for boys and girls to mix at informal gatherings and parties in their homes, 'fumblings' became a familiar element of mixed-sex sociability.⁵⁹ One oral history interviewee, Sally, recalled how, when her parents went out for Bridge club on Sunday evenings in the early 1960s, her friends would come over to play cards and listen to music. Sometimes, however, these occasions became group petting sessions: 'We'd have snogging sessions...we used to, in the living room and there'd be about 4 or 5 couples all lying on the floor snogging'.⁶⁰ Amongst her friends, Sally was quite happy to engage in these 'low level' sex acts.

Elsewhere women suggested that 'snogging' through the final slow song was considered a normal part of any dance. Many young couples continued to save their amorous overtures for the walk home and the 'privacy' of the doorstep,⁶¹ but others did not wait until the end of the evening and did their 'snogging' on the dancefloor itself or on the chairs that surrounded the room. Theresa, for example, described how she used to judge the 'success' of a dance on whether or not she got a 'snog', a fact she would note in her diary with a special symbol.⁶² When Christine went to dances she slow danced with boys in order to prove that she had as much 'street cred' as her friends. Yet her failure to translate these dances into kisses was a source of confusion for her classmates:

We went to this dance, I suppose I was about 18 and we were dancing and talking and of course he was quite chatty at the time...and we were talking and talking and I overheard in the school cloakroom the following week, one of the friends saying, my nickname at school was C, "C and B were

talking all the time, you know, they were the only ones who were talking to each other, everybody else was wrapped around, they were all necking, I couldn't understand what they were talking to each other about!"⁶³

By the 1960s, when Christine was in her late-teens, going to dances with boys and being seen kissing were crucial components in girls' social and sexual lives and young women were expected to be participating in such rituals.⁶⁴ As Christine's testimony reveals, girls' behaviour was watched over and judged as much by their peers as it was by their parents and teachers. While girls were aware of rules, expectations and codes of conduct set by the adults, they also existed within peer cultures that had different values and established new imperatives for young women to live up to.

Although displays of heterosexuality were potential sources of social status, there were some unspoken rules about just how visible such acts should be and girls had to carefully negotiate the boundaries between displaying their sexuality enough to benefit from the social kudos it could bestow while avoiding being seen as 'fast' or 'promiscuous'. Being seen kissing boys was a good way for girls to demonstrate to their peers that they were coupled up (even if only temporarily) and that they were getting boys' attention but girls were wary of putting too much on display. While kissing could be visible, it was deemed distasteful if put on show too conspicuously.⁶⁵ The imperative of social status can thus explain why so many young couples enjoyed spending time in cinemas and dancehalls. These spaces were characterised by low lighting and loud noise, offering a degree of privacy that was unavailable to teenagers elsewhere. Charlotte recalled that the cinema 'was always looked on as a good place for courting as it was dark, warm and comfortable' creating opportunities (and indeed expectations) for kissing and petting.⁶⁶ At the same time, however, these spaces also appealed as they were inherently public. While couples did not want to be watched when being physically intimate (hence the preference for the backrow of the cinema), there was value to being seen on the backrow itself and some were keen to benefit from the fact of their sexual activity being known. Part of the appeal of 'dating' in leisure spaces such as cinemas and nightclubs was thus the potential for being spotted by one's peers and for girls' heterosexuality to be recorded within the broader social consciousness.

Personal testimonies of women born in the 1950s and 1960s also suggest that pre-marital sex itself was less stigmatised than it had been previously and could now be valued and rewarded. Women's testimonies did not indicate that they were actively encouraged or pressured into having sex by their friends or classmates, but those who had been teenagers in the late-1960s and 1970s depicted sex as having been aspirational for girls who wanted to be seen as modern and 'cool'. Within some communities girls developed intense anxieties around remaining virgins once they perceived their peers to have become sexually active. This was not framed so much as a fear of missing out on sex itself but as a fear of exclusion from their female peer networks. Mass Observer Marjorie, who was a teenager in Yorkshire in the 1960s, described her 15-year-old self's increasing desire to have sex in terms of her female relationships and social network:

At school, it seemed that sex was the sole topic of conversation...A bunch of girls in my year talked about little else - on the bus, in class, at break. Increasingly I felt left out, as though I was one of the few virgins left in the world. Although these girls were not my particular friends, nevertheless, they had quite an influence on my friends and me. It was all talk of course, but how was I to know that? I became obsessed by the thought of losing my virginity.⁶⁷

Similarly, Kathy explained that she had sex for the first time at 17 because: 'I was desperate to have "done it", as most of my close friends had, and they talked of little else.'⁶⁸ While engaging in sexual activity was still understood to be transgressive, it was not always a source of shame and scorn. In fact, for some, it was now aspirational. A teenager in the mid-1970s, Terri justified losing her virginity at 14 through her belief that 'It made me more likely to be friends with the people I liked in the class...the sharp, streetwise girls, who sat at the back and broke the rules about school uniform and talked about sex'.⁶⁹ Although many girls continued to believe that penetrative sex was only appropriate within marriage or long-term relationships, by the 1970s having boyfriends and being sexually active was associated with notions of popularity and being 'cool'.⁷⁰

Heterosexuality was thus an active presence within girls' homosocial lives. The interpersonal relationships at play within mid-twentieth century cultures of heterosexuality extended beyond girls'

relationships with boys and the regulatory dynamics between young women and the adults that educated and protected them to include girls' peer networks. Being able to demonstrate that they were attractive and desirable to boys was an important means by which girls claimed social status. Perceptions of social hierarchies and the politics of the playground thus encouraged girls to engage in heterosexual relationships and contributed an additional layer of meaning to girl-boy relations. Whilst older cultures that punished girls for too openly displaying their sexuality did not disappear, heterosexuality also had social value. Visible sexuality did not always cost girls their reputations but could work to heighten girls' popularity and social status.

V

How girls perceived their peers and girls' anxieties about how they themselves were perceived by those around them were thus central to how many girls understood and managed their feelings and relationships. However, the social components of heterosexuality should not be minimized to an emotionally superficial culture of judgement, competition and condescension. The above discussions illustrate how matters of sexual reputation and practice were often key criteria for determining social hierarchies as gossip and rumours could alter a girls' reputation and social standing among her peers. However, these cultures did not simply function to distance and isolate girls from one another. Rather, running the gauntlet of adolescent heterosexuality together could be a unifying experience for girls as sharing and discussing their thoughts and feelings about sex with one another were an important way in which girls developed bonds of friendship based on shared intimacy. In contrast to cultures of marriage and domestic sexuality in the twentieth century that prioritized privacy and understood intimacy as a key component of marital intimacy, personal reflections on teenage heterosexuality emphasized an alternative culture of intimacy in which girls' discussion of feelings and experiences (both past, anticipated and imagined) functioned to establish homosocial bonds.⁷¹

Studies of working-class girlhood in late-twentieth century Britain stressed that teenage girls' relationships with boys often came at the expense of their female friendships. Commitments at work

and home were said to ensure that girls had limited leisure time and that girls had to choose between spending time with their friends or their boyfriends.⁷² For girls who stayed in school into their late-teenage years, however, this dichotomy was less stark as schools functioned as social spaces for young people. Throughout the school day there were plenty of opportunities for young women to partake in non-academic activities, including talking about boys. Even if girls did dedicate their 'leisure' time to their boyfriends, they could spend the school day discussing their romantic lives and the sexual exploits of others with their classmates and friends. Audrey remembered passing notes about her dates to school friends during boring lessons while Linda recalled the hours that her and her friends spent discussing 'who had done what' while fielding during rounders lessons.⁷³ Beyond being a fun way to spend time in their own right, then, girls' relationships with boys provided much kindling for girls' relationships with other girls.

The fact that young people discussed matters of sex with one another was widely acknowledged by researchers and social commentators in the post-war decades. Michael Schofield's 1965 study of young people and sex found that 62 per cent of boys and 44 per cent of girls first learnt about sex from their friends.⁷⁴ Studies into how young people acquired sexual knowledge prompted much anxiety among parents, teachers, health workers and sociologists who feared the 'misinformation' that circulated among teenagers.⁷⁵ By the late 1960s, the widespread nature of sexual discourse was increasingly understood as being as much of a problem as its repression: 'the issue is not one of ignorance *versus* information', one commentator wrote, 'but one of getting information given carefully by responsible sources as opposed to getting it from poorly informed friends'.⁷⁶

Among young women themselves, however, this form of 'informal' sex education was highly valued. At a time when school sex education often focussed solely on anatomy and reproduction,⁷⁷ conversations with their friends were 'often the only source of "uninhibited"...sexual information' available to young people.⁷⁸ Teenage girls viewed sexual activity as a crucial component of 'growing up' and many turned to their friends to help them make sense of this new situation. Beyond gossiping about classmates or discussing sex in abstract, many girls engaged in a more 'confessional' style of sex talk in which they shared and reflected upon their own experiences. Girls not only told their friends that

they had boyfriends but often elaborated on the types of sexual activity that were occurring within these relationships. Asked if her and her friends discussed sex during her teenage years, oral history interviewee Hazel confirmed that they had:

And would you talk to your friends about sex?

Oh yes, yes, yes.

In what kind of context?

Well, you'd um...what would you do? Well, you'd sort of talk about, 'Oh did you kiss?' 'Did you have a grope?' 'Have you done it yet?'

Similarly, Tracy recalled sitting on the steps of her convent school at the age of thirteen listening to her classmates' older sisters discussing sex: 'They were discussing what they'd done with boys and I remember us all thinking "Oh my God, that's absolutely disgusting!"'⁷⁹ While these conversations could be a form of gloating and one-upmanship as individuals sought to 'prove' their sexual experience and desirability to their peers, for the less experienced girls listening to these accounts these offered unmatched insights into what sexual activity looked like and felt like.⁸⁰

These conversations did not only function as a source of information exchange, however. They also played an important role in developing girls' relationships with one another. The cultures of sex as social currency described above relied upon sex transcending the private sphere and becoming 'public'. Yet, at the same time that teenage girls were actively participating in this process, many young women continued to feel that some elements of sexuality and sexual practice were sensitive and not for public consumption. As such, girls were very discriminating when judging the audience of their sex talk; discussions of girls' personal experiences usually took place within small groups of close friends. As Linda expressed: 'You talked to people you knew were doing similar things'.⁸¹ Talking about sex was not simply an amusing way of passing time when at school but created intimacy between friends. Within girls' friendship groups, sex talk became a way of establishing a sense of group identity based upon mutual trust.

It was with their friends, for example, that girls discussed their anxieties about sex. For those growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, there could be discrepancies between what popular culture had led them to believe sex was like and the reality of their experience. Confused about how their experience diverged from what they had imagined sex would be like, girls found sharing personal stories with friends helpful in demystifying sex. As Jacqueline recalled:

There was an expectation it was going to be all bells and lightening and the whole world's going to rock and you're going to change...And that was a disappointment. And then you met girls where it did and you thought, 'Oh my God, there's something wrong with me!' And then you met girls who didn't, you thought, 'No, I'm okay'.⁸²

Similarly, girls often turned to each other in moments of crisis. Friends were an important source of comfort and support when girls' relationships broke down.⁸³ While girls' discussions of their peers' sexual exploits were often judgemental and unfeeling, pregnancy scares were often deeply unsettling to the broader peer group. The realisation that 'the worst' could happen to girls like them could be shocking and girls turned to their close friends for reassurance (often at the same time that they ostracized the pregnant girl herself).⁸⁴

As adolescent sexual culture increasingly understood sex as a source of social power for girls, the new stakes associated with heterosexuality could also leave girls feeling immensely vulnerable. Not only were girls navigating the new terrain of liking boys/having boyfriends and engaging in new forms of interpersonal activity but the anxieties surrounding these experiences were made particularly fraught in the post-war decades as newer values of sex as social currency competed with older values of propriety and sexual restraint. In this volatile emotional landscape, girls often used their female friends to help them work through their thoughts and feelings, seeking guidance and support from those around them who they understood to be facing the same challenges. Feeling adrift from the perceived safety of childhood, girls gained much in terms of collective identity, reassurance, condolence and support by sharing their experiences with friends. At the same time, then, that changing meanings of sex could pit girls against one another as they 'competed' for status based upon superior sexual knowledge and

attractiveness, discussions of sex and the sharing of experience worked to develop bonds of trust between girls and could become the basis of genuine intimacy and friendship.

VI

In the late 1960s, the American sexologist Lester A. Kirkendall asserted that ‘standards of sexual behaviour...are much less a matter of sexual knowledge than of feelings – feelings of acceptance or rejection, of accomplishment or failure’.⁸⁵ This call to understand the emotional landscape of adolescent sexuality in broad terms is similarly necessary when studying the experiences of young women growing up in Britain in the second-half of the twentieth century. While studies of courtship and marital heterosexuality in the mid-twentieth century have done much to explore changing understandings of romantic love, individuals’ experiences of different-sex relationships were understood through multiple emotional registers including pride, shame, envy and anxiety.

Between 1950 and 1980, the form and significance of these various emotions shifted as the role of sex within the lives of young women itself changed. While the ‘Nice Girl’ remained an important figure in constructions of femininity, the notion that sexual activity had only negative value for unmarried girls began to falter. During this period, young women came to understand sexual experience and male interest as an asset rather than a liability or embarrassment. Having boyfriends and being sexually active were understood as key markers of modern femininity and, as such, these were valued as a source of social currency. As this article has demonstrated, girls’ negotiation of their heterosexuality was shaped not only by the expectations of their male partners or through their own sexual desires but also by the new codes of social status and popularity articulated by their female social networks. Girls’ relationships with other girls played a central role in girls’ relationships with boys. These findings provide a richer account of this generation’s experiences and lay the groundwork for future studies of female friendship as a core element of social life in twentieth-century Britain.

These conclusions have important implications for histories of sexuality more widely in offering an alternative explanation for how and why sexual mores shifted in the second half of the twentieth century. The exploration of the social life of adolescent heterosexuality provided here

suggests that the crucial change in the post-war decades was not that the increasing availability of contraception allowed individuals to indulge an ‘innate’ biological desire for sex but that new incentives to engage in sexual activity came to the fore. As young women came to associate sexual desirability and experience with modernity and maturity, talking about sex became a staple of young women’s interactions and engaging in sexual activity became a marker of social status. While this new culture was shaped by shifts in the tone of popular culture which glamorized ‘liberated’ female sexuality, changes in individuals’ attitudes and behaviours were determined by how this culture was mobilized within teenage girls’ social networks. When viewed at scale changes in sexual mores may have appeared to constitute a cultural revolution but for individuals sexual values were embedded in their local communities and they negotiated their heterosexuality in light of their personal relationships with their peers, classmates and friends.

By focussing on the space between ‘macro’ histories of culture and legislation and the ‘micro’ histories of individual sexual subjectivities, this research demonstrates how matters of sexuality were embedded within social networks and dynamics. While the particular relationship between social life and sexuality explored here was specific to post-war Britain, understanding sexuality as a social phenomenon can shed further light on histories of sex in other contexts. This approach allows us to better account for how matters of reputation and stigma shaped individual sexual practice throughout history and has the potential to help explain shifting expectations of marital and queer sexualities. While we should not ignore the importance of sexuality as a subjective experience, the ‘social life’ of sexuality had a profound impact on private choices and practices and was a key site in which sexual change was enacted.

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